

1. Praxeology

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PRAXEOLGY AND ITS CRITICS

Praxeology, the purportedly *a priori* foundation of economic science endorsed by Ludwig von Mises and many (though not all) other Austrian economists, is often attacked for being unduly rationalistic and dogmatic; but many such criticisms are based on a misunderstanding of what is actually being claimed for praxeology. This chapter attempts to sort out what the praxeological approach entails and how it holds up to common criticisms, before sketching some future lines of needed research in the praxeological project.

What Is Praxeology?

Praxeology (from Greek *praxis*, action, and the suffix *logia*, meaning, roughly, the scientific study of something) refers to a science of, or set of principles about, human action (or perhaps simply about action per se, understood as the application of means to ends) that is thought by many (though not all) thinkers in the Austrian School tradition, and most especially by Ludwig von Mises, to have the following two characteristics. First, praxeology is *a priori* – that is, knowable without being derived from sensory experience – by contrast with *a posteriori* knowledge, which *is* so derived. (*A priori* and *a posteriori* are Latin for “on the basis of what is prior [to experience]” and “on the basis of what is posterior [to experience],” respectively.) Second, praxeology is the foundation of economics – the set of truths about human action from which the fundamental principles of economic science can be derived.

Earlier Austrian economists had based their economic reasoning on fundamental propositions about the nature of human action (e.g. Menger, 1994), but had not explicitly described them as *a priori*; this was specifically Mises’s innovation,¹ elaborated in his three major methodological works (Mises, 1962, 1985, 2003), as well as in the lengthy opening methodological section of his general economic treatise *Human Action* (Mises, 1996).

As an example of the way that Mises thinks general economic principles can be derived from *a priori* truths about human action, consider the *law of dimin-*

ishing marginal utility, which states that each additional unit of a good affords the agent a lower utility than the previous unit. This law is often understood as an empirical generalization about human psychology, specifically about our tendency to become satiated as we consume more of the good in question. So understood, the law would be open to exceptions; for example, in the case of a highly addictive good, we might assign a higher utility to later increments of the good than to our initial sample.

But Mises insists that while this notion of satiation may be a largely true empirical generalization about how our preference ranking changes over time, it is not at all what the law of diminishing marginal utility is getting at. Rather, the point is that (so long as our preference rankings do *not* change) we necessarily apply the first unit of a good to our most urgent want, the second unit of a good to the second, and so on, simply because it would make no *sense* to describe something as our most urgent want unless it were the one whose satisfaction we sought first (Mises, 1996, p. 124). Hence the law of diminishing marginal utility, unlike the law (or generalization) of the satiation of wants, is not derived from observation; we can grasp it simply through considering it by means of our rational faculty, as with the propositions of mathematics and logic.

Objections and Replies

The doctrine of praxeology is frequently characterized by critics as unduly rationalistic and dogmatic, but Mises's claims about praxeology are often misunderstood. For example, even largely sympathetic critics (e.g. Caldwell, 2004, p. 195; Nozick, 1997; Steele, 1992; Vaughn, 1994, p. 77; cf. Lavoie, 1994, p. 60) have insisted that the application of praxeological categories to the real world requires auxiliary premises derived from experience, as if this were a *criticism* of Mises; but in fact it is precisely what Mises teaches. In *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science*, for example, Mises writes:

Into the chain of praxeological reasoning the praxeologist introduces certain assumptions concerning the conditions of the environment in which an action takes place. Then he tries to find out how these special conditions affect the result to which his reasoning must lead. The question whether or not the real conditions of the external world correspond to these assumptions is to be answered by experience. But if the answer is in the affirmative, all the conclusions drawn by logically correct praxeological reasoning strictly describe what is going on in reality. (Mises 1962, pp. 44–45)

Even Mises's student Israel Kirzner, a prominent Austrian theorist in his own right, reports being "surprised" when, upon asking Mises "how a person can know that human beings other than himself are indeed purposeful," he was

told that this is something we learn “by observation” and not *a priori*, and that it is only once we have established this fact that we can then go on to apply the *a priori* categories of praxeology to their actions (Kirzner, 2001, pp. 88–89). Perhaps, then, it would be best to characterize praxeology not simply as the *a priori* science of human action, but rather as the science of those aspects of human action that can be grasped *a priori*.

Although Mises’s best-known student, Friedrich Hayek, gradually moved away from Misesian praxeology over the course of his career, in his early writings, such as *The Counter-Revolution of Science* (1952) and the essays collected in *Individualism and Economic Order*, one can see him holding what is at least a closely related position; “all propositions of economic theory,” he writes, “refer to things which are defined in terms of human attitudes toward them” (Hayek, 1948a, p. 52, n. 18), which in turn implies that “we can, from the concepts of the objects, analytically conclude something about what the actions will be,” since once we “define an object in terms of a person’s attitude toward it, it follows, of course, that the definition of the object implies a statement about the attitude of the person toward the thing” (Hayek, 1948b, pp. 62–63; “analytic” in this context means “true by definition”).

The Misesian idea that the application of *a priori* praxeological principles to real-life situations requires auxiliary premises drawn from experience is also endorsed by the early Hayek. Consider, for example, his analysis of the classical *law of rent* into two components, one *a priori* and exceptionless, and one *a posteriori* and not exceptionless:

One is part of pure economic theory and asserts that whenever in the production of one commodity different (scarce) factors are required in proportions which can be varied, and of which one can be used only for this purpose (or only for comparatively few) while the others are of a more general usefulness, a change in the value of the product will affect the value of the former more than that of the latter. The second proposition is the empirical statement that land is as a rule in the position of the first kind of factor, that is, that people know of many more uses of their labor than they will know for a particular piece of land. The first of these propositions, like all propositions of pure economic theory, is a statement about the implications of certain human attitudes toward things and as such necessarily true irrespective of time and place. The second is an assertion that the conditions postulated in the first proposition prevail at a given time and with respect to a given piece of land. (Hayek, 1952, p. 32)

In a sense, then, the principles of praxeology are *hypothetical* in form: *if* such-and-such conditions hold, then necessarily some further such-and-such must be true. Praxeology cannot tell you whether a change in the value of some product having both land and labor as inputs will result in a greater change in the value of the land than in the value of the labor; it can only tell you that a change in the value of some product having both land and labor as inputs

will result in a greater change in the value of the land than in the value of the labor *on the hypothesis* that people know of more uses for labor than for land. (Compare: geometry cannot tell me how many sides my next slice of pizza will have; it can only tell me how many sides it will have *if* my next slice of pizza is square (or triangular, or whatever). The truth of the conditional (if p then q) is *a priori*; but the truth of the antecedent (p) is empirical, and so the truth of the consequent (q) is so as well.)

Not all proponents of Misesian praxeology understand its *a priori* character in quite the same way, however. Murray Rothbard, for example – another prominent Austrian who studied under Mises – takes the principles of praxeology to be broadly empirical (Rothbard, 1957), but to be nonetheless deserving of being called aprioristic because the observations on which they are based are so fundamental to and pervasive in human experience that they are inevitably prior to ordinary empirical investigations.

Mises's and Hayek's insistence that the fundamental principles of economics are *a priori* and exceptionless is easily misunderstood as involving a claim to *infallibility* regarding them. The truths of mathematics are likewise *a priori* and exceptionless, yet that fact is perfectly compatible with the possibility of getting them wrong and making mistakes in our calculations.

Milton Friedman, one of the most prominent representatives of the rival Chicago School tradition in economics, has criticized praxeology in the following terms:

That methodological approach, I think, has very negative influences ... [It] tends to make people intolerant. If you and I are both praxeologists, and we disagree about whether some proposition or statement is correct, how do we resolve that disagreement? We can yell, we can argue, we can try to find a logical flaw in one another's thing, but in the end we have no way to resolve it except by fighting, by saying you're wrong and I'm right. (Quoted in Ebenstein, 2001, p. 273)

Friedman seems to be thinking of the contrast between empirical and praxeological evidence as a contrast between evidence that is *public*, available to all for inspection, and evidence that is *private*, some sort of subjective inner voice. But logic and mathematics, for example, are *paradigmatically* public; we do not each examine our own private number 17, for example. And that is why seeking to “find a logical flaw in one another's thing” is a perfectly appropriate way of dealing with disagreement about *a priori* matters. In Gottlob Frege's terms, Friedman seems to be confusing the *logical* realm with the *psychological* realm (Frege, 1977; c.f. Long, 2004, 2006a).

Mises has also been criticized for his claim that, from a praxeological perspective, all human action is rational. But it's important to understand the narrow character of Mises's claim. If I start humming “Happy Birthday” whenever I see a kitten, because I am in the grip of a conviction that kittens are

likely to turn of a sudden into angry rhinoceroses, but that this transformation can be prevented by singing “Happy Birthday,” my action is rational simply in the sense that *given* my beliefs about what kittens are likely to do and how they can be prevented from doing such, and *given* my desire to avoid angry rhinoceroses, singing “Happy Birthday” is an appropriately chosen means to the end of avoiding the rhinoceroses. In calling my action rational, Mises is not endorsing my positive views about the causal powers and liabilities of kittens. Relatedly, David Ramsay Steele (1992) criticizes Mises for ascribing consistent preference orderings to all economic agents; but Steele’s proffered counterexamples to Mises’s thesis are an example of consistency *over* time, whereas all Mises is claiming is consistency *at* a time (c.f. Long, 2004; Rothbard, 1997, pp. 216–217).

Austrian economist Don Lavoie rejects what he sees as the “Euclidean” approach of Misesian praxeology in favor of an approach in which the grasping of praxeological principles is as much a matter of falsifiable, *a posteriori* “interpretive” observation as is those principles’ application (Lavoie, 1986, 1994). But as I’ve argued elsewhere (Long, 2004), along Kantian and Wittgensteinian lines, our *ability* to grasp praxeological principles and our *ability* to apply them may be interdependent even if one is *a priori* and the other *a posteriori*. Certainly, we might never be able to grasp praxeological principles in the absence of a background of social interaction, communication, and interpretation; in the same way, we would likely be unable to grasp mathematical truths without sensory experience of and interaction with collections of material objects, yet that doesn’t render mathematics a mere generalization about the behavior of such objects. Sensory experience may be required as the *occasion* for our developing *a priori* principles, without those conceptions somehow being *inferred* from such experience.

ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Analytic or Synthetic?

Many issues in praxeology invite further research. One is whether praxeological propositions are *analytic* – that is, true by definition, in that their truth can be ascertained simply through an *analysis* of the meanings of the relevant terms – or whether they are instead synthetic *a priori* in Immanuel Kant’s sense: synthetic in that they are not true by definition, but involve *synthesizing*, putting together, one concept with a different concept that is not already contained in the first concept; *a priori* in that our knowledge of such truths is nevertheless not derived from experience. (Kant thought that mathematics, for example, was synthetic *a priori* rather than analytic, since if one tries to establish the truth of “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” as analytic by saying that “4” is *defined* as

“ $2 + 2$,” one will be left unable to account for the truth of “ $3 + 1 = 4$,” since “4” cannot be defined *both* as “ $2 + 2$ ” and as “ $3 + 1$.”² Yet mathematics is plausibly *a priori* nonetheless.)

Hayek, as we’ve seen, regards praxeological principles as analytic; for Hans Hoppe, by contrast, they are synthetic *a priori* (Hoppe, 1995, pp. 17–18). In *Human Action*, Mises regards them, and indeed all *a priori* truths, as analytic: “Aprioristic reasoning is purely conceptual and deductive. It cannot produce anything else but tautologies and analytic judgments” (Mises, 1996, p. 38). Yet in his later work, *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science*, Mises defends the existence of synthetic *a priori* statements, before unexpectedly concluding that in the case of praxeology (though not necessarily in other areas of thought), the distinction between analytic and synthetic *a priori* is “of verbal interest only” (Mises, 1962, p. 44). This topic calls for further exploration, especially in light of the fact that many philosophers, ranging the gamut from Willard Van Orman Quine (1951) to Ayn Rand (1990), have questioned the coherence of the analytic-synthetic distinction itself.³

The Action Axiom

Part of the solution to the analytic-synthetic puzzle may lie in the so-called “action axiom” (as this term is used in Austrian economics, which is not always how it is used in other intellectual traditions). While statements of praxeological principles often seem to be “true by definition,” the basic fact of human action is often described differently, as a fact about *reality* (not just a relationship among concepts) to which one is committed on pain of pragmatic incoherence, since any attempt to deny it will itself be an action (cf. Rothbard, 1997, pp. 68–69).⁴ Even if many of the theses of praxeology (like the aforementioned law of diminishing marginal utility) seem to follow simply from the meanings of their constituent terms and so to be analytic, the action axiom seems to establish a tie, not between one concept and another, but between a concept and its real-life exemplification, in a way that seems more synthetic *a priori*. Without the action axiom, the web of concepts that constitute praxeology might be conceived of as a web of concepts without instances, like facts about unicorns or the like; but once the reality of human action has been established, all the various hypotheticals that constitute praxeology gain a toehold in reality.⁵

But what exactly does the axiom action assert? That human beings act? If that’s taken as a claim about a particular biological species, it can hardly be *a priori*, and indeed we’ve already seen Mises denying that it is so (in his exchange with Kirzner). If instead “human” is being understood not biologically but praxeologically, as meaning something like “rational agent,” then “human beings act” will be merely one more analytic tautology, and the

pragmatic incoherence to which, e.g. Mises's and Rothbard's point will be question-begging. Perhaps all that the action axiom establishes, then, is that action *exists*? Would that perhaps be enough?

Which Are the Agents?

There's a related question as to how far the emphasis on *human* action is justified. Is the application of means to ends not also found among non-human animals? Or if animals are said not to act, or not to act in the same sense that humans do, then what precisely are they missing?

Turning from the subhuman to the superhuman, Mises argues that an omnipotent God would be unable to act, since "action can only be imputed to a discontented being, and repeated action only to a being who lacks the power to remove his uneasiness once and for all at one stroke" (Mises, 1996, p. 69). But is it really true that all action is prompted by dissatisfaction with the way things are? Do we not sometimes act, not to *change* a situation, but to *keep* it from changing? In that case we might be described as being dissatisfied with the way things *would* be if we didn't act; but since the counterfactual scenario we're seeking to avoid never occurs in the actual timeline (assuming our action is successful), isn't our dissatisfaction purely hypothetical?

Mises goes on to claim that for an omnipotent being "the categories of ends and means do not exist, since such a being can achieve every end without the employment of any means" (1996, p. 69). Hence once again an omnipotent God could not act, at least so long as action is understood as applying means in order to achieve ends. But aren't there many cases in which achieving an end by *these* means rather than *those* is actually part of the end? If I'm climbing Mount Everest, it's not because I simply want to be at the top (at least if I am like most climbers of Everest); rather, I want to get to the top *by climbing*. If I were simply to be carried to the summit by helicopter (or, for that matter, teleportation), I would not have achieved my goal. So, is Mises justified in ruling out the possibility that an omnipotent God might also wish, not merely to accomplish certain ends, but to accomplish them by some means and not others?

Impositionism or Reflectionism?

Mises tells us that we "see reality, not as it 'is' and may appear to a perfect being, but only as the quality of our mind and of our senses enables us to see it" (1962, p. 18). Mises here is often interpreted (whether accurately or not) as holding the view, often attributed likewise to Kant (again, whether accurately or not) that our *a priori* categories are true of the world we experience because the structure of our mind *imposes* them on experience – a position

that Barry Smith (1990) calls “impositionism.” Murray Rothbard, by contrast, takes *a priori* categories to be features of extramental reality that we *discover*, not something we impose – a position Smith calls “reflectionism” (Rothbard 1997, pp. 64, 105). Here there is room both for the exegetical question as to how to understand the positions of Mises and Rothbard, and more importantly the deeper philosophical question as to whether imposition or reflectionism is correct.

It is also possible to question whether the opposition between reflectionism and impositionism so much as makes sense. I’ve argued elsewhere (Long, 2004, cf. 2006b) that insofar as impositionism conceives of logical categories as imposed by the mind on a reality that, but for the mind’s imposition, would not be subject to them, it requires the very conceivability of an illogical reality that it is at pains to deny; and likewise, insofar as reflectionism conceives of logical categories as imposed by *reality* on a *mind* that, but for reality’s imposition, would lack them, it requires the very conceivability of an illogical mind that it is correspondingly at pains to deny. If that’s right, then the logical character of reality and the logical character of the mind may turn out to be two sides of the same fact, without any possibility of grounding one in the priority of the other.

Praxeology and Determinism

For Mises, “[t]he logical structure of his mind enjoins upon man [a belief in] determinism” (Mises, 1985, p. 73), since action (whose reality Mises regards, as we’ve seen, as undeniable on pain of pragmatic incoherence) involves the application of means to ends, which implies causality, which implies necessitation. For Rothbard, by contrast, it is the thesis of causal determinism that is pragmatically incoherent, since if determinism is true, then “man’s mind is ... not free to think and come to conclusions about reality,” including the conclusion of determinism itself (Rothbard, 2011, p. 6).

Praxeology presumably cannot commit us *both* to the truth *and* to the falsity of causal determinism, so these two arguments can’t both be correct. (Note that they *might* possibly both be incorrect.) So what is the right thing to say about the praxeological status of determinism? Is Mises perhaps too quick to assume either that the *existence* of causation implies the *universality* of causation, or that causation inherently implies *necessitation* (or both)? Is Rothbard perhaps too quick to assume that having one’s beliefs necessitated by antecedent circumstances must involve having one’s beliefs necessitated by factors that *bypass* one’s reasoning process rather than operating *through* it?

The Boundaries of Praxeology

The final area for future research that I shall point to is perhaps the most fundamental of all. Praxeologists (I've claimed) are committed to the view that *some* economic principles are *a priori*, while *others*, those needed for the application of the former, are auxiliary premises knowable only *a posteriori*. But where does the *a priori* portion of economics stop and the *a posteriori* portion begin?

As an example: Hayek claimed that his 1927 article "Economics and Knowledge" was "an attempt to persuade Mises" that "what was *a priori* was only the logic of individual action," and that as soon as economic analysis is extended to "the interaction of many people," it enters "the empirical field," since "the empirical element enters in people learning about what the other people do." To Hayek's surprise, Mises "approved the article as if he had not been aware that it was a criticism of his own views" (Caldwell, 2004, pp. 221, 421).

Austrians have reacted in a variety of ways to the question of Mises's agreement or disagreement with Hayek on this point. Lawrence White, for example, argues that while Hayek was correct in regarding the capacity of economic agents to learn from market feedback as empirical rather than *a priori*, he was mistaken in regarding this as a disagreement with Mises, since (as we've seen) for Mises the application of praxeological principles to actual situations is an empirical matter (White, 1984, p. 25, n. 90). Israel Kirzner, by contrast, regards the ability to learn from market feedback as *part* of the Misesian concept of action rather than merely auxiliary to it, thus lending this ability something closer to an *a priori* praxeological status (Kirzner, 1973, p. 32); on this reading, perhaps Mises's appearance of agreement with Hayek was either misunderstanding or mere politeness. Here we are presented with both an exegetical question (what was Mises's view?) and a deeper philosophical question (what *should* it have been?); the latter, in particular, is not confined to this ~~despite~~ over market feedback but ramifies throughout the entire range of economic phenomena.

NOTES

1. The term "praxeology" originates not with Mises but rather with Louis Bourdeau (1882) and Alfred Espinas (1890), but this early usage has no strong connection with Mises's approach. With the variant spelling "praxiology," the term is also used by a variety of different schools of thought in a variety of different senses (Auspitz, Gasparski, Milicki, & Szaniawski, 1992); with both spellings, it is often used in connection with Polish philosopher Tadeusz Kotarbiński, on whom see Hiz (1954).

2. Many rather more complicated efforts have been made to derive the truths of mathematics from analytic definitions of basic mathematical operations, but this project has not met with success.
3. For some of my own suggestions in this area, see Long, 2004, 2005a, 2005b.
4. Compare Aristotle and Descartes on the axiomatic status of the law of non-contradiction and the fact of one's own existence, respectively.
5. In the words of Henry Hazlitt: "The deductive side of economics is no less important than the factual. One can say of it what Santayana says of logic (and what could equally well be said of mathematics), that it 'traces the radiation of truth,' so that 'when one term of a logical system is known to describe a fact, the whole system attaching to that term becomes, as it were, incandescent'" (Hazlitt, 1996, pp. 176–177).

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